

Claudine Monteil

Marie Curie and her Daughters (Calmann-Lévy, 2021)

Translation sample, pp. 9-14

Translated from the French by Kate Deimling

I

Force of Will: From Poland to France

When the electric bell rings, little Marie Sklodowska raises her head and suddenly freezes.

Not because of the chill in this Warsaw classroom in the winter of 1874. No. Because this mean Russian czar, whose name is whispered in low tones at home, this man who inspires dread, has sent an inspector to their school.

In her neat and proper clothing, Marie is the best student in the class. She quickly hides the Polish workbooks and textbooks that her teacher has been using even though they are forbidden. Another child runs to the dormitory to hide the banned books.

They must not get caught. A terrible punishment could befall Marie's father or mother. Her father's brother, Uncle Zdzislaw, who rebelled against the occupiers and fled to France, has already been captured by the czar's secret service and sent in chains to a camp in Siberia, like so many of his fellow Poles.

Now the child's body begins to tremble and her cheeks feel like they're on fire. She knows what's going to happen and lowers her eyes, hoping she won't be noticed. The door

opens. The inspector, a harsh expression on his face, enters to find nice little girls sewing buttonholes, looking like angels.

With his crude, heavy gait, the man stomps about confidently, opening each desk to check. He must not find a single Polish book, not a single line in this language that the Russian occupiers want to erase from the memory of an oppressed people. Poland has been wiped off the map. It's now called "the Province of the Vistula."

The inspector seems almost satisfied. The books are all in Russian, telling the history of the czars and Russia throughout the centuries. As if Marie's beloved Poland never existed. How difficult it is for a child to learn to lie, to conceal! She must also learn to hide her pain and humiliation.

The man has not finished his visit. Now he wants to quiz one of the pupils. Marie knows the teacher will choose her. She stands up, blushing with shame. She lists one by one the names of the Russian imperial family and their titles as she has been commanded to. Finally, in his deep voice, the inspector barks: "Who governs us?" She is silent. When he reprimands her, she answers: "His Majesty Alexander II, Czar of all the Russias." He seems satisfied with her answer and with himself. When he disappears into another classroom, Marie bursts into tears. How could she have lied that like, when she feels so much love for Poland in her heart?

* * *

The seven-year-old Marie returned home that day to her parents, her three sisters, Zofia, Bronia, Helena (called Hela), and her brother, Józef. She felt sad and ashamed, believing that she had betrayed her beloved country. But her father, Wladyslaw Sklodowski, was reassured. A

sturdy man with a bushy beard and a serious look, he was a civil servant and a teacher of mathematics and physics who had recently been named deputy head of the high school on Nowolipki Street. As he saw it, his daughter had just saved the family from great danger. There had been too many Polish revolutionaries at their home, and he had realized some time ago that resisting the Russian occupier would mean only exile, prison, and suffering for the entire family. Marie, who was at the top of her class, had the right attitude.

But the girl was still trembling. She approached her mother, reached out to touch her, but stopped, just grazing the fabric of her dress. How Marie would have loved to seek comfort in her arms! But the child knew that the affection she dreamed of was impossible. Exhausted by tuberculosis, Marie's mother could not risk infecting her children. The beautiful Bronislawa Sklodowska, with her elegant oval face and dark hair, had been the head of a prestigious school for girls — one of the few women to attain such a post at the time. But when she became ill, she had to stop teaching and avoid any contact with students. Sometimes, her fingers brushed the child's forehead, but she would quickly pull them away.

Marie could not remember ever being held or kissed by her mother. Around the time of her birth, the insidious disease had struck, gradually stealing her mother's strength. Marie had never known her in good health. Anxious to keep her family safe, Bronislawa ate her meals on separate dishes and sent her children out to play in the yard, although she yearned to touch them and show them her love. Nevertheless, Marie still grew up in a family that was full of tenderness and interested in science, art, music, and literature, especially poetry, which offered comfort when read aloud to the children, who would suddenly become quiet and attentive. Their mother, so open to others, always invited friends of different beliefs to their home, at a time when tolerance was often lacking.

One evening when the children were playing, their world was suddenly shaken. Their father came back from the high school, opened the mail, and staggered weakly to his favorite armchair, a letter in his hands. The polite, hypocritical answers of little Marie at school hadn't been enough to prevent misfortune from falling onto him and his family. Another misfortune due to the Russian occupation. Through an official letter, Wladyslaw Sklodowski learned that he would be removed as assistant inspector, his salary would be reduced, and his apartment taken away. His wife was sure this was an act of revenge by the head of the high school, who was close to the czar's men. Wladyslaw remembered disagreeing with him in defense of a student who had made a grammatical error in his Russian essay.

The punishment was terrible. The family had to quickly move to a smaller apartment, and Wladyslaw's reduced salary was not enough to feed everyone. So they squeezed together and rented out part of the apartment to some young male boarders. Now they had no privacy and communicated in whispers. All of Poland was suffocating.

And, of course, they had to scrutinize every expense. Saving money was difficult, and sometimes risky. Mr. Sklodowski came home one evening devastated. The investment he had agreed to make in order to please his brother-in-law had turned out to be a financial abyss leading to bankruptcy. The money he had saved bit by bit with such care — thirty thousand rubles — had been swallowed up. He would no longer be able to afford dowries for his daughters. They would have no chance of making good, conventional, comfortable marriages. They were now condemned to poverty. He would never forgive himself for being so naïve.

He still hadn't gotten over this financial failure when, shortly afterwards, in January 1876, one of the boarders came down with typhus. Two of Marie's sisters were infected: Bronia, the eldest, to whom Marie was especially close, and Zofia, who succumbed to the disease and

died too young. Too ill and contagious to accompany her child's body to the cemetery, Bronislawa Sklodowska watched from the window as her husband and daughters slowly proceeded behind the coffin. Although she was only nine years old, Marie had already known so much suffering and grief. The adults were loving, but they seemed so fragile and overwhelmed by worry.

Marie was dismayed to see her mother's health decline day by day. Two years after Zofia's death, Mrs. Sklodowska, exhausted by her battle with tuberculosis, passed away on May 9, 1878. The loss was terrible. At ten years old, Marie sank into depression. Mr. Sklodowski became his children's only teacher and was determined to give them love and emotional support to try to make up for what they lacked financially. He told himself that the children needed to have as normal a childhood as possible. Over time, liveliness and laughter returned. Marie had fun with her sister Bronia, of course, but also with boys and girls her age. She learned to dance the polka, the mazurka, the oberek. She fell in love with literature, science, and especially math, the subject her father taught.

As a teenager, Marie had an immense thirst for knowledge. This would lead to much happiness in her life and reward her greatly. A few years after her sister Bronia, she won the gold medal for best graduating student. All the prizes were books written in Russian, but Marie was happy nonetheless. Her father was present at the awards ceremony. Wladyslaw Sklodowski was relieved. He had managed to give his children an excellent education despite the loss of his wife.